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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that in addition to being an important source of data for a project evaluator, project humor also provides a check on the evaluator's comprehension of background and events (i.e., if an evaluator does not understand a joke, he or she has probably not attained an insider's perspective). In addition, humor becomes a source of solidarity with other project members. As evaluators project and respond to humor, they are provided with an important way of affirming their ties to the people they are studying. Humor as a source of social science data, humor in ethnographic studies (including humorous outcroppings or xerox humor in the workplace, written information and political cartoons, and folktales and anecdotes), humor as a source of validation, and humor as a source of solidarity are considered. It is concluded that humor is an important data source for ethnographic studies. The three sources of this humor include outcroppings, written sources, and anecdotes. While like most unobtrusive measures, these sources are seldom confirmatory, they do provide a useful source of validation for other information. In addition, "getting the joke" can be its own source of validation. Humor establishes solidarity with people within the culture under study, provides a source of invitation as an insider, facilitates important ties to informal leaders, and makes the work of ethnography more rewarding and enjoyable. (RLC)

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PROBING PROJECT HUMOR FOR INSIGHTS IN ETHNOGRAPHY: A CASE STUDY

J. Nicholls Eastmond, Jr.

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Probing Project Humor for Insights in Ethnography: A Case Study

Abstract

Conventional wisdom in evaluation would have us regard humor expressed in a project or program as one additional indicator of the context or organizational climate, a minor one, but one certainly to be reckoned with. Verbally expressed humor, particularly when a degree of sarcasm is involved, may be seen as a mirror of organizational climate and may say much about subtle relationships existing between people (Oshry, 1990). Xerox humor (i.e. cartoons hung on bulletin boards, written jokes, etc.) can be seen as one of a number of "outcroppings" (Fetterman, 1989) that can be read in a fashion analogous to geological strata protruding from the earth. These indicators, in a sense, "stick out" and should not be ignored by the keen observer.

This paper takes the argument a step further. It argues that besides being an important source of data for a project evaluator, project humor also serves a function of providing a check on the evaluator's comprehension of background and events ("If you don't get the joke, you probably haven't attained an insider's perspective!"). In addition, humor becomes a source of solidarity with other project members. As you project as well as respond to humor, it provides an important way of affirming your ties to the people you are studying.

Humor and everyday life

Humor is a feature of life that is so completely human and pervasive as to defy rational description. Webster defines humor as "that quality which appeals to a sense of the ludicrous or incongrouous . . comical, amusing". The ability to recognize humor is often seen as a gift of wit, a prized gift in human affairs. The 1992 Presidential Debates, still quite clear in memory as of this writing, were often considered won or lost depending upon whether the candidate could use humor effectively. In the first debate, when Ross Perot quipped, "I'm all ears," a joke about his own appearance, he gained the empathy and rapport of his television audience. Why is humor so powerful and such a common occurrence in human life?

Humor fills a basic human need, to relax and to put the world back into perspective. While the kinds of things found humorous varies from culture to culture, humor itself seems to be universal, found in some form in every culture on earth. The figure of the court jester in medieval society comes to mind, serving an important function in the kingdom.

In modern society humor exists in numerous forms: jokes, cartoon strips, political cartoons, office humor in xerox form, to name a few. It seems that the balancing function of humor is important -- i.e. keeping people humble, bringing in a dose of reality to bureaucratic affairs -- and as much as the serious minded may scoff at the notion, humor is often the measure of the sanity of the situation or person.

Our jokes allow many socially unacceptable ideas to be expressed, and consequently they can be threatening to the despot. Humor allows us to think the unthinkable, to express out loud the feelings that everyone has been secretly hiding, and thus to clear the air for further action.

People usually enjoy humor, particularly if it is not at their own expense. They will pay money to be entertained with humor. Having laughed aloud with someone -- a guest speaker, a teacher, a colleague -- one can get about the business of work without worrying so much about petty irritations and intrusion. Humor, being a kind of reward in human relations, functions like a gift in allowing access to another person's personal space.

Humor as a source of social science data. Attention to the use of humor is not new in the social sciences. Sigmund Freud, (1964, orig. ca. 1899) keen observer that he was, showed quite convincingly that many mistakes and humorous observances occur because of psychological self-correcting mechanisms. We now call these minor mistakes or slips of the tongue, "Freudian slips." Frequently there is an unpleasant or sexually oriented message at the root of them. Here is a classic example of a "speech blunder", reported vividly by Freud from nearly a century ago:

> A wealthy but not very generous host invited his friends for an evening dance. Everything went well until about 11:30 p.m., when there was an intermission, presumably for supper. To the great disappointment of most of the guests there was no

> supper; instead, they were regaled with thin sandwiches and lemonade. As it was the close of Election Day the conversation centered on the different candidates; and as the discussion grew warmer, one of the guests, an ardent admirer of the Progressive Party candidate, remarked to the host: 'You may say what you please about Teddy (Roosevelt), but there is one thing -- he can always be relied upon; he always gives you a *square meal*, ' wishing to say *square deal*. The assembled guests burst into a roar of laughter, to the great embarrassment of the speaker and the host, who understood each other. (p. 52).

Freud's position was that there is "a reason for every mistake (p. 53)," and that the keen observer could learn much about both social and psychological reality by attending to important details in conversation and in life, details that are commonly passed over as being unimportant. His entire book, the *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, gives a convincing argument for this kind of keen observation.

The remainder of the paper draws upon the two years' experience of the author as a one-fourth time project ethnographer in the Community Family Partnership (CFP) project. Funded over a five-year period by the Administration for Children and Families, the same governmental agency as the Headstart Program, this project is one of twenty-four demonstration projects nationwide of the Comprehensive Child Development Project. Working with sixty poverty level families selected on the basis of their having a young child, the project provides comprehensive services to all family members, working toward the dual goals of child development and economic self-sufficiency. The ethnography portion of the project involves studying the "culture" of the project, the local community, and the wider national scene, attempting to document from a qualitative standpoint the kinds of developments that are taking place. The project has an extensive management information system with quantitative data supplied; the ethnography is designed to keep important qualitative information from "falling through the cracks."

Humor in the ethnographic study. The signs of humor are important indicators for the ethnographer. They generally fall under the category of unobtrusive measures, since as part of the local scene, the researcher simply observes and records, without

calling attention to their happening. Fetterman (1989) lists three areas that easily lend themselves to observing humor: outcroppings, written information, and folktales. Each has an important place in the ethnographic study and is examined in turn.

Outcroppings is a geological term referring to a portion of the bedrock that is visible on the surface, i.e. something that sticks out. Examples would be the smell of urine on city streets, a syringe in a schoolyard, a Cadillac in a driveway, a vacant lot littered with garbage. From these signs, important inferences can be made, allowing conclusions to be drawn about the wealth or poverty, the amount of care or neglect, the incidence of drugs, etc.

Humorous outcroppings frequently appear in the form of xerox humor in the workplace (Hofsess, 1990). Two examples of such humor from the Community Family Partnership Project are shown, the first created by one witty staff member with a message to convey and the second simply a cartoon that a person had found elsewhere and chosen to display. The first one is particularly significant, because it is an "inside joke". Someone from outside the Project would be unable to decipher the hoard of acronyms needed to understand the message.

The setting was a time in the project when the paperwork demands of the project seemed to overwhelm the case workers attempting to provide service to poverty-level families. The "cause of death", the Family-Based Support Plan was a very detailed plan established and maintained for each project family. For any particular Family Consultant, there would be 10 of these plans to enter onto the computer and to update from time to time. People were feeling the strain of the extra burden on their time. The message in the cartoon seems to poke fun in at least three ways:

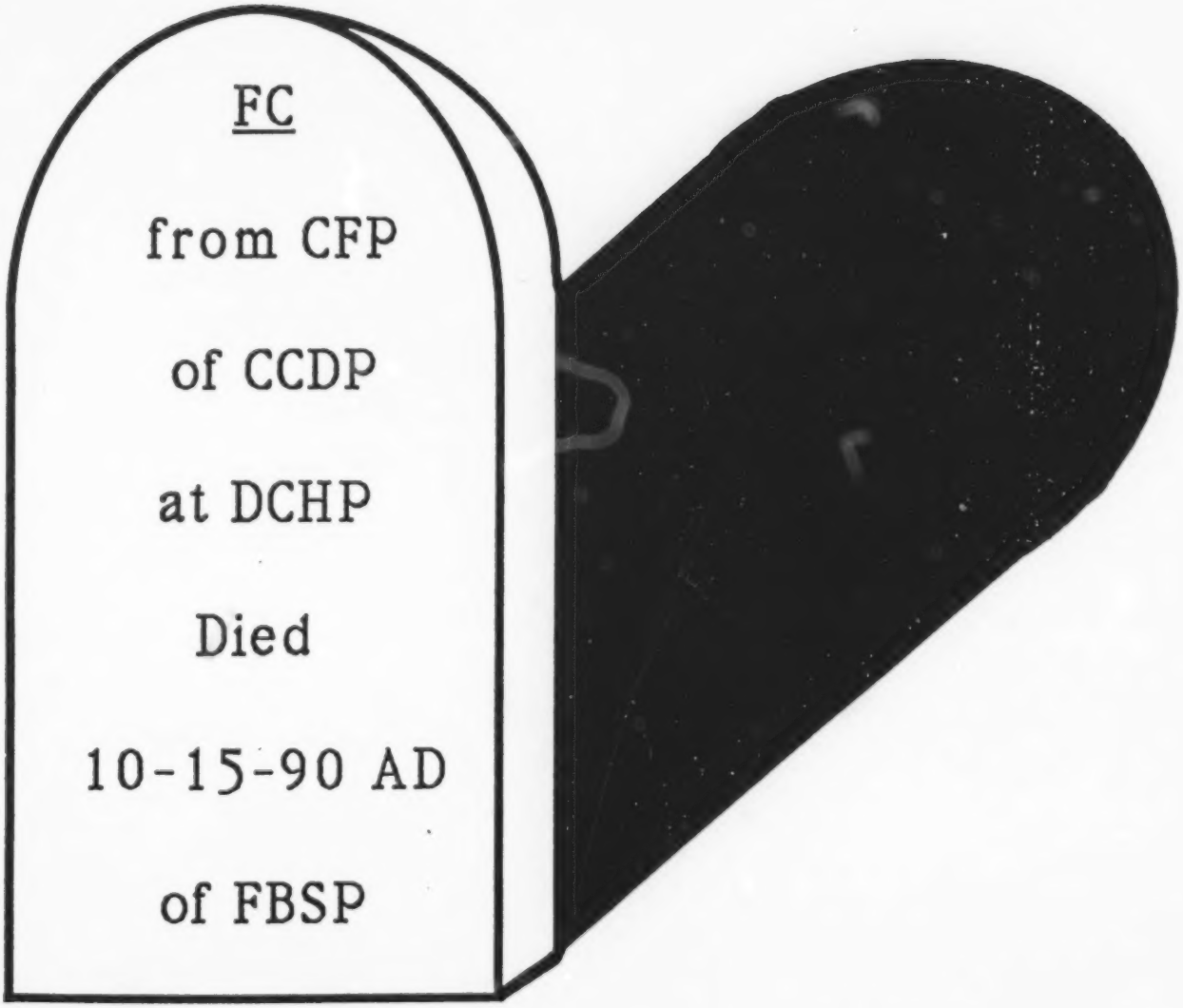
(1. What a load of bureaucratic acronyms we deal with here!

(2. The paperwork load is excessive; and

(3. The stress of this project is bound to kill us (mild sarcasm).

While in some settings, such humor might have been the source of a reprimand or at least some disapproval, in this project it was seen as a source of humor. At least four copies of this cartoon were

Figure 1: Example outcropping: A Project-drawn cartoon



Translation: A (F)amily (C)onsultant from the (C)ommunity-(F)amily (P)artnership of the (C)omprehensive (C)hild (D)evelopment (P)rogram Died 10-15-90 (A)nno (D)omino of a (F)amily (B)ased (S)upport (P)lan.

observed posted by staff cubicles; one was posted by the supervisor and displayed prominently in her office. The cartoon became a discussion point for the 7 family consultants and the data coordinators, attempting to develop some form of compromise. That the cartoon was well received by Project administrators could be seen as evidence of the health of the project.

Similar humor can be found in humor posted on bulletin boards or office doors in the CFP Project. Usually these are clever sayings (Like: "Don't tell me what kind of a day to have" -- a wet cat pictured) or cartoons from sources like "The Far Side," "Calvin and Hobbes". Frequent themes are the difficulties of parenting, the effects of stress, and the foibles of everyday life. As Hofsess (1990) notes, these expressions have value to the individual and to the organization.

> Office humor never has spread faster, say people who study such things. As a result, these signs and slogans have become an ever more familiar feature of the corporate landscape, a fully entrenched part of our popular culture.
>
> And all this is good news, say many business consultants, because witticism and criticsm plastered on the company bulletin board reduce tension in the workplace, create rapport between workers, and spark creativity. (p. 15).

Numerous instances of such humor have been seen in the CFP Project and are indicative of the kind of atmosphere prevalent. The ethnographer would do well to examine these as important data sources.

Written information: Another important data source for ethnographers is written information, both from inside the community being studied and from outside. Frequently, this material is humorous.

For two years, the CFP Project ethnography could profit from the talented cartoons of Kerry Soper, a cartoonist for the campus newspaper, *The Statesman*. These cartoons captured a slice of life in the local area with remarkable acuity. Mr. Soper was chosen as the winner of the 1990 Charles M. Schulz Award for the best college cartoonist in the nation. The CFP ethnography reports for the past two years have made extensive use of his work. Two Soper (1991) cartoons depicting the Utah political climate are shown in Figure 2. They each portray some of the polarized climate that exists. In the

Figure 2: Political Cartoons relating to Utah and Cache Valley

Quadhoppers
POLITICAL CONVERSATIONS IN UTAH:
TWO REPUBLICANS:
SO YA GONNA VOTE STRAIGHT PARTY AGAIN THIS YEAR?
YEP. YOU TOO?
YEP.
TWO DEMOCRATS:
MAN, THE STATUS-QUO HERE IS STIFLING!
THEY'VE NEVER HEARD OF A 2-PARTY SYSTEM!
CHANGE HERE IS AS LIKELY AS REAGAN REGAINING HIS MEMORY!
SOPER
A REPUBLICAN AND A DEMOCRAT:
CONSERVATIVE FAMILY VALUES!
INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS!
THE ECONOMY!
THE ENVIRONMENT!
FORD!
SUBARU!
CHEDDAR!
GOUDA!
A REPUBLICAN, A DEMOCRAT AND AN INDEPENDENT:
WHAT A LOSER.
YEAH, A REAL GEEK.
NO TAX ON FOOD.
JERKS.
NO TAXES
HI RICK. THIS IS MY GRANDMA - SHE'S UP VISITING FROM HOOPER UTAH.
HI.
FOR YOUR OWN GOOD, YOUNG MAN, I'LL HAVE YOU KNOW I'M AN ACTIVE MEMBER OF G.A.D.D. - "GRANDMOTHERS AGAINST DEGENERATE DEMOCRATS."
WELL THEN I'D BETTER TELL YOU THAT I'M A MEMBER OF G.C.A.R.G. - "GAY COMMUNISTS AGAINST REPUBLICAN GRANDMOTHERS.".
SOPER
HE WAS JUST KIDDING GRANDMA! LET GO!
CALL SENATOR HATCH AND TELL HIM I GOT ANOTHER ONE!

Source: Kerry Soper (1992) The Best of Quadhoppers 1 & 2.

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cartoon depicting conversation with the Democrats and Republicans, there is an "inside joke" about the independent candidate for governor, Merrill Cook, whose plan for no tax on food was rejected by both Democrats and Republicans (and eventually by the voters as well). The ethnographer would do well to make use of local newspapers, to include the cartoon strips, as a source of insights about the culture under study. Randall Harrison (1981) has done a fine job in illustrating how to read the "cartoon code" and glean important information from it.

Folktales and Anectdotes: Fetterman (1989) notes that stories are important in both literate and nonliterate societies:

> They crystallize an ethos or a way of being. Cultures often use folktales to transmit critical cultural values and lessons from one generation to the next. Frequently these stories are humorous. Because they reflect the values of the group, their inclusion in ethnographic field notes and reporting is important (pp. 70-71).

The following is an anectdote excerpted from field notes of June 6, 1991. The setting was a staff luncheon where the ethnographer was the only male attending, with some fifteen women staff participating. The conversation had turned to the topic of pregnancy (a frequent vehicle for women to establish closeness with one another), and one of the Family Consultants had quipped, "I've always said I would be willing to go through that experience (giving birth) just as soon as the man shared equally in the effort and pain." She then proceeded to tell a story:

> Recently a drug has been developed that could be injected into a Father to make him feel the exact pains being experienced by his wife as she went through labor. (People commented on how that was probably possible, but highly unlikely to take effect, as the men would surely avoid it.) "That would solve the population problems in some of the developing countries," interjected another Family Consultant. "What about around here?" someone interjected. The first F.C. resumed her story: One family tried this shot but with no success. 'Give me another shot," the husband said, "I don't feel a thing." So they gave him another and then another, but with no effect. Finally, they walked outside, and there was the milkman dead on the porch. (Laughter).

To the ethnographic observer, this story could be an important information source. The storyteller, being single, could be identified as one of the leaders of the group. Her account dealt with one of the sources of frustration for the Family Consultants (all of whom are female), namely that fathers in the Project frequently seem aloof from the concerns of the project mothers, the primary contact point for the Family Consultants. Besides providing comic relief, the story could provide an insight into a source of tension in the Project and potential source for further investigation.

Humor as a source of validation

The most useful point about humor is that it is its own source of correction: If you don't get the joke, you probably have not attained the insider's perspective. The inclusion of the ethnographer into the circle worthy of hearing the joke or enjoying the humor is a not-so-subtle sign of inclusion into the group.

In the CFP Project humor cited above, in most cases the ethnographer could participate in the humor. While care is taken to be as unobtrusive as possible, taking notes is essential to retain the original flavor of the statements. Sometimes project members have become a bit apprehensive about having their humor written down. "Will you include this in your report?" I have been asked on more than occasion. My standard reply: "Yes, this and then some." Thus far I have felt a growing level of acceptance, and I feel that attention to humor promotes that. In the case of the staff-developed gravestone cartoon shown in Figure 1, I had to ask for an interpretation of the acronyms. I took this as a sign that I had much yet to learn to be able to represent an insider's viewpoint (emic perspective).

On occasion, I have been aware that humor can be used for power purposes Oshry (1990) provides a lengthy humorous dialog over asking for a glass of water. Humor can also be inappropriate or misused. On one occasion the CFP Project Director informed me that one part-time employee had been reprimanded for using humor that made fun of the physical appearance and weight of another staff member, in that staff member's presence. The employee using the inappropriate humor left the project within two months, with encouragement from project administration but short of having been fired. Humor is clearly a two-edged sword worth watching carefully. In this case the employee had been insensitive, and in

spite of coaching was not able to continue on within the normative expectations of project members.

Humor as a Source of Solidarity

It is clear that working as an ethnographer generates some tensions. In spite of efforts to remain unobtrusive, the ethnographer simply cannot be "a fly on the wall", and thus is to some degree intrusive in all social situations. It seems that humor helps to narrow the gap between the researcher and the people of the project.

Humor can be used to widen that gap, if either party chooses to do so. In a recent encounter with another project director not connected with CFP, where ethnographer services were being offered, the project director chose to make the introduction a source of humor, and ended with the ethnographer feeling like the "butt of the joke", as another staff member laughed. It seemed afterward, however, that the humor was used as a test to see if the ethnographer had "thick enough skin" to be allowed into the inner circles of the project. Thus, in the end, that humor may be used to close the gap.

A final mention is that in exchanging pleasantries, quips and jokes, the ethnographer openly invites someone with a good story to come by and share that story. Being recognized as someone with a sense of humor opens many doors to frank conversation and building of trust. Again, attention to humor pays huge dividends for the ethnographer. Particularly as it links the ethnographer to informal leadership in the group being studied, the function of humor is of particular value.

In Conclusion

Humor has been shown to be an important data source for the ethnographic study. Three sources of this humor were illustrated with examples from the Community Family Partnership Project, where the author has worked as project ethnographer for the past two years. These sources are (1) outcroppings; (2) written sources; and (3) anectdotes. While like most unobtrusive measures, these sources are seldom confirmatory, they provide a useful source of validation for other information. And in addition, "getting the joke" can be its own source of validation.

In addition to providing data and helping validate it, humor serves the purpose of establishing solidarity with people within the culture under study, a source of invitation as an insider and an important tie to informal leaders. And finally, it makes the work of ethnography more rewarding and enjoyable. A sense of humor is a trait not to left behind when conducting ethnography.

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